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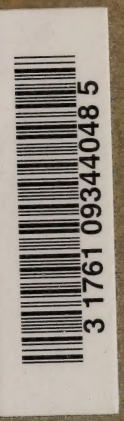

CERVANTES

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CERVANTES.

CERVANTES

THE NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM

1921

BY

JAMES LAVER

COMMONER OF NEW COLLEGE

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CERVANTES.

Live dreams, then write them; ay, but live them first.
So only may the eager spirit's thirst
Be quenched and satisfied; so only may
The great heart's keen world-hunger pass away.
How poor were life, how small and mean a thing,
To peck like fowls, nor ever try the wing,
Nor ever beyond unknown summits fare,
Nor scale the ramparts of the upper air,
Nor lightly skim the seething waters o'er,
Nor dying fall upon the barren shore.

But then, ah then, when life was rich indeed,
And man, from mediaeval bondage freed,
Went forth to make the world's bounds wider yet—
Then was it good to be alive, and set
Unresting feet in ways untrod before,
And at the shrine of High Adventure pour
All treasures out of heart, and mind, and will,
And with the fruit of distant vineyards fill
Life's votive cup, to take, and taste—and spill.

Men may forget the long years by the fire
Of their own hearth, the circumscribed desire

That dwells in quiet homes; they may forget
The calm delight, the not unsweet regret
Of peaceful days, though all these things are sweet.
But those rare moments when the pulses beat
To a quick tune, that mocks at wounds and pains,
And the eager blood goes singing through the veins—
These shall remain, even when on the eyes
The surely gathering film of darkness lies,
And everything, save courage, droops and dies.

Cervantes in his dungeon at Seville
Let his adventurous soul go wandering still;
Saw all the countries he had journeyed through,
All he had done, and all he dreamed to do.
Knew once again the days of fife and drum,
A heart indifferent to whate'er might come,
Closed to despair, tuned to the ecstasy
Of youth, and war, and wine, and Italy.
Saw yet again the Márquĕsa's proud hull
Ride the Sicilian bay, her castles full
Of bolts and cannon balls, and slumbering fire,
Freighted with hopes and rigged with long desire,
The sunlight gilding every rope and mast.
Don John's aboard, the fleet hoists sail at last;
A thousand banners suddenly unrolled,
Blazoned with saints in silk and cloth of gold,

Silver with stars, rich with the sombre red,
Of pictured blood by holy martyrs shed,
Dying to save the realm of Christ from loss—
And over all the symbol of the cross.

Long years at sea—so did it seem to him
Who, sick with fever in a chamber dim
Of the ship's hold, made his uneasy bed.
The tramp of seamen sounded o'er his head.
Scarcely he heard the rattle and the sweep
Of the long oars, athwart the mist of sleep;
But felt the vessel labour suddenly,
And knew that she had found the open sea.
No more he knew, save that he heard men say
The Turkish fleet was lodged in Patras Bay,
With Ali Pasha, old in crimes and years,
And Uluck Ali, tyrant of Algiers,
And Chulouk Bey of Alexandria.
But now the Christians sweep by Ithaca,
Long line abreast with Doria on the right,
And Barberigo stretching out of sight
Towards the left his whole Venetian fleet.
Don John the centre holds, that he may meet,
The Turkish fleet the soonest—well he may,
For now three hundred ships are under weigh.
Their whip-like pennons crackling in the wind,

Forward the galleys sweep, their bulwarks lined
With crowding soldiers, a ferocious band
Fingering their dagger's hilt with eager hand.
The pale light gleams upon their helms of steel,
The whites of cruel eyes which no appeal
For mercy ever dimmed; the labouring oar
Churns the grey sea to milk, a hungry roar
Rises aloft as the two fleets draw near—
The Christian vessels send an answering cheer.

Cervantes wakens from a nightmare sleep,
His limbs are lead, and yet he cannot keep
His soul from singing, while the opening din
Bursts forth of murderer and culverin.
With trembling hands he buckles on his sword—
No further preparation can afford
His high impatience—springs upon the deck
To see the Márquěsa is half a wreck
Already, and a fleet of Turkish boats
Pulling towards the vessel where she floats,
All rudderless—a sudden rush of men
Over the ship's high-arching side, and then—
He hears his own voice shouting a command,
In his small vessel, to a motley band
Of half a score of soldiers, and his mind
Clears suddenly, languor is left behind.

A single moment longer, and his head
Swims in another mist, this time blood red.
Dimly he sees, scarce heeds, as one at grips
With Death, the furious eyes and snarling lips
Of those he fights with; hardly can he feel
Their blows, nor hear the clash of steel on steel.
A pistol deafens him; the planks are wet
With new-spilt blood, where it is hard to set
The sliding feet, or give the sword free play.
He only knows the hot desire to slay
Burn through his soul, and smite his tongue with drought,
He feels a pang, raises a sudden shout,
And then the light, like a blown lamp, goes out.

Cervantes in his dungeon at Seville
Pondered these things, and smiled against his will.
Was all the mingled agony and bliss
That he had known, only to lead to this?
To leave a spirit, unexhausted yet,
Cooped up in prison for a paltry debt?
The sunlight striking through the narrow slit
That served the cell for window, fell and split
On the monotonous stones that formed the wall,
And made his backward-wandering brain recall
The heavy days, the parched and barren years,
That he had passed, a captive, at Algiers;

How once again at sea, the hostile gales
Had driven him on the coast of false Marseilles,
Where his Most Christian Majesty's allies
The Barbary corsairs, took a noble prize
Of three good vessels; how he fought too well,
So that his Moorish masters would not sell,
For a slight sum, so valorous a slave—
Only great lords they held, could be so brave.
Till he at last—what centuries it seemed—
For twenty score gold ducats was redeemed,
Set foot once more in Spain, yet could not rest.
His tireless spirit turned towards the West,
Where he might meet adventurers of his kind,
And yet another Eldorado find.
'Twas not to be, the plodding years crept on;
Almost before he knew it, youth was gone.
But yet, before the final flicker died,
The sweetest, bitterest pain was not denied
To tear the heart of one who, in the past,
Had held love's ecstasy not first, but last,
And deemed a rolling drum and clinking blade
Better than all fair faces ever made.
Oh days to which the hastening eve did wrong!
Oh honied nights, too short and yet how long!
O love, what draught is this which Thou dost pour
Sweet as the grape, bitter as hellebore,

Dark as the soul where passion dwells a guest,
Pure as the chalice holy hands have blessed,
Warm as the wine in presses of the South,
Cold as the kiss upon a statue's mouth,
Which gives at once more than a martyr's fire,
And all the aching languors of desire,
And leaves the very cup, the wine run out,
Almost too high a thing to dream about.

Yet further years, Cervantes was to find
Debts are not paid with wealth of heart and mind,
And such, on earth, the power of sordid cares
That they entrap the strong soul unawares.
Don John is dead, and many of the best
Of those he knew, gone to uneasy rest;
Or all the thirst, e'en youth could not assuage,
Quenched in the calculating joys of age.
And he, Cervantes, who had spent too well
The gold of life, lodged in a debtor's cell.
What fools we are, he mused, we errant knights,
Wasting our labour in fantastic flights
Of high romance, when sane and sober men
Grow rich on rents of field, or byre, or pen.
They rest, we travel our uncertain way,
Trapped out in armour of a by-gone day.
What is he but an old and crazy fool

Who loves not only war, but ridicule?
So half in mockery, half in sadness dreamed
Of his past labours, and two figures seemed
To shape themselves, now clear, now dark and dim,
And each, he knew, embodied half of him.
One was a lanky knight with burning eye
On a lean horse, his long lance lifted high,
His proud lips primmed in infinite disdain
Of all ignoble things, fatigue and pain,
His arched and eagle nose, his nostrils wide
Scenting adventure still; and by his side
Another, round, and rubicund, and small,
His face with little soul in it at all,
Full of sly humour and coarse common sense,
Careful of comfort, quick at counting pence,
Glad to arrive, fearful at starting still,
Yet carried onward by the stronger will
O'er perilous mountain heights and barren plains,
With very little pay for all his pains,
But cold o' nights and scorching heat at noon,
Where food comes seldom, slumber none too soon,
While tireless Quixote serenades the moon.

The knight in front, the lumbering squire behind
Went wending down the pathways of his mind,
Cervantes saw, as poets sometimes see,

The plan complete of what his book should be,
And traced already, with ironic skill,
The doughty knight, charging the whirling mill—
Or giant—and the luckless sheep that died—
Say rather paynim armies scattered wide;
Filled all the by-ways of the wilderness
With monsters, or with damsels in distress,
And all the towns most thronged and common streets
With mad material for knightly feats;
Warmed to his hero, mocked and loved him too,
Treating, when he had paid the laughter due,
Almost with tenderness the high Idea
Which beautified the face of Dulcinea,
And lent religious meaning to a guard
Kept o'er old armour in a tavern yard.
Many, he thought, will laugh and rub their hands,
But here and there a man who understands
All I have poured into this book of mine,
Will see the gleam of something half-divine
In these wild pranks, this crazy nobleness.
The world that worships nothing but success
Will hail the work as satire, and rejoice
That common sense at last has found a voice;
And see exposed to mockery in my page
The faults and follies of a former age.
To whom I here make answer—Very true,

I laugh to scorn old-fashioned antics too,
And would not, if I had the power, recall
The outworn days of Amadis of Gaul,
Nor strive, across the magic Breton lake,
The kingly soul of Arthur to awake,
Nor trouble Roland at the gate of Spain
To seize his blade and fight his wars again.
Those days are vanished like an idle tale
When all brave men went forth to find the Grail,
When wizards winged on broomsticks through the night,
And giants dwelt on every castled height—
Yet there were truly giants in those days,
And if Don Quixote, riding the world's ways,
Found only pigmies, worthless of his steel,
Found only bodies that no souls conceal,
Found only wealth wherein no splendour is—
Was it your fault, O mocking world, or his?

Cervantes in his dungeon at Seville
Saw, smiling, the mind's alchemy distill
From all the whirling vapours of his brain
The elixir of pure thought; the gnawing pain
Of unaccomplished labour was laid by.
Borne on the wings of his own phantasy
He soared above two ages, and looked far
To where the wide world's utmost cities are.

Unformed to prosper at the courts of kings,
With little of the suppliant skill that brings
Fame in the schools, or silver in the mart,
But rich in knowledge of the human heart;
With wisdom such as learning cannot win,
And mirth that hides no bitterness within,
With senses keen, yet not divorced from sense,
The prisoned debtor, poor in nought but pence,
Felt his own happy fortune to possess
Such godlike insight, for it is no less,
And knew himself, by that one gift alone,
Greater than pallid Philip on his throne.
He raised his head, and saw with kindling eye
Beyond the prison wall the open sky,
Felt on his cheek the winds of morning blow,
And in his veins the bounding blood aglow.
Far from the coast he knew the town to be,
Yet smelt the full salt savour of the sea,
And heard above man's puny shouts and cries,
Olympian laughter ringing down the skies.

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